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ROBERT E. LEE AS AN OPERATIONAL COMMANDER: A CRITICAL LOOK

by

ARTHUR A. ADKINS
Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Arthur A. Adkins

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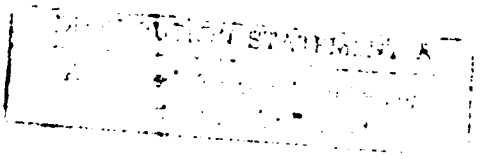
Paper directed by
H. W. Clark, Jr., Captain, U.S. Navy
Chairman, Operations Department



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The "halo effect" of Lee's personality and tactical expertise has been allowed, perhaps even manipulated, to remove the shadow of doubt that should have accompanied every rudimental examination of his performance as a military commander. The purpose of this paper is to reintroduce a little doubt, precipitate questions, and suggest a few selected "lessons learned" that may possibly be of some value in today's military arena, specifically at the operational level.

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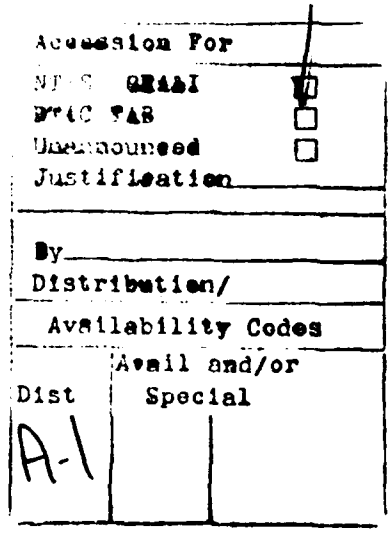
Abstract of

ROBERT E. LEE AS AN OPERATIONAL COMMANDER:

A CRITICAL LOOK

I have no delusions of unearthing some heretofore undiscovered historical tidbit of information and setting modern Civil War Societies on their ear in a twenty-five page, double-spaced examination of Lee as an Operational Commander. The central theme of this paper is simply that the "halo effect" of Lee's personality and tactical expertise has been allowed, perhaps even purposely manipulated, to remove the shadow of doubt that should have accompanied every rudimental examination of his performance as a military commander in the Civil War.

Eliminating doubt inhibits questioning; inhibiting questioning hampers learning. The purpose of this paper is simply to reintroduce a little doubt, precipitate questions, and suggest a few selected "lessons learned" that may possibly be of some value in today's military arena, specifically at the operational level.



HALO EFFECT

A common phrase associated with flight instruction, "halo effect" refers to the tendency of an instructor to assume that because a student does particularly well in one phase of instruction, or on one particularly difficult maneuver, he will continue to do well, and therefore does not require the level of intense supervision less adept students require. This of course, could be, and often is, a fatal mistake.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Being, at best, a casual student of history, my knowledge of the Civil War was pretty much limited to the basics learned in high school: the North won, it was not about slavery (?), and Robert E. Lee was the greatest General the United States has ever produced, before or since, with the possible exception of George Washington.

Although admittedly not enough to spur me to exhaustive research, it had always bothered me a little that the MVP was picked from the loosing team. Having recently read a little more and gaining a little better understanding of the war, it seemed even more odd to me that Lee could maintain this amazing, indestructible aura about him. That this aura survived the Civil War **and** almost a century and a half of what should have been intense historical scrutiny, is even more incredible.

Whether or not he was a great man, or great general is not the question. One could argue that just being an American general puts you in some pretty high cotton (with notable exceptions, of course). But **the** greatest American military leader of all time?[1] ". . .the greatest soldier whoever spoke the English tongue"?[2]

He **did** fail to accomplish his mission. The South **did** loose. Although certainly not the only criteria in determining historical superstardom, these immutable facts are the basis for a very fundamental question.

Lee, very early in the war, emerged as the preeminent military figure for the South. Did he use his expertise, authority and influence to best advance the Southern cause?

On this subject, there is much room for doubt. His regional myopia, misunderstanding of the enemy, lack of strategic insight and personal idiosyncracies may have kept him from providing the south with the military leadership it desperately needed. Additionally, the aura surrounding him, even at the time, may have kept the South from searching for that military leadership elsewhere.

One of the first problems in pursuing this kind of almost blasphemous accusation, is that it **is** an almost blasphemous accusation. Robert E. Lee's place in American History is chiselled in stone. Chapter II briefly examines the foundations of the mythical Lee.

The second problem is the long-accepted premiss that the South could not possibly have won, regardless of political or military leadership. Given the circumstances, it is suggested that Lee's efforts were superhuman, and the best the South could have hoped for. Chapter III outlines defensive options the south might have pursued; possible strategic benefits; and, inherent stumbling blocks to any truly defensive strategy, to include General Lee. The purpose of this chapter is simply to introduce a little doubt into a widely-held belief.

In the questioning mood hopefully created by Chapters II and III, Chapter IV looks at Lee's campaigns into Maryland in 1862, and

Pennsylvania in 1863, from a strategic/operational viewpoint, i.e., what else was going on at the time? As an operational commander, did Lee ensure that his offensive campaigns fit in the "big picture" of Southern strategy? Chapter V offers some selected lessons learned and Chapter VI is a brief conclusion.

There is little doubt that Robert E. Lee was the quintessential Southern officer/gentleman, a leader of glorious proportions and probably the closest thing to a hero that the South (or perhaps even the North) had to offer after the devastating experience of the Civil War. That is not the subject of this paper. There is no intent to defame Lee's character or diminish his standing in American History. The sole purpose is to reexamine some lessons, from an operational level of war perspective, that may have wittingly or unwittingly been passed to present day military officers.

CHAPTER II

LEE, THE MYTH, WHY AND HOW

> The Encyclopedia Americana (1989) describes Lee as "one of the truly gifted commanders of all time". The Civil War Dictionary states that Lee "...earned rank with history's most distinguished generals". To ensure the tradition is passed on to our children, a 1988 juvenile biography keeps it simple: "Lee was a military genius .... a nearly invincible general." "Noble he was. Nobler he became."...Douglas Southal Freeman.[3]

It's not hard to believe that over the years Lee has become bigger than life. Legends do that. It is, however, difficult to accept that there may have been a conscious effort, bordering on conspiracy, to distort historical facts surrounding Lee's performance in the Civil War. Given the enormous quantity of published Civil War history, that the distortion could have survived for a hundred years before it began to be seriously challenged, is almost inconceivable.

Lee was one of the two most prominent characters (Lincoln, of course, being the other) in the most significant event in American History. Literally thousands of articles, papers, books and volumes have been written on Lee himself, and countless others on the Civil War, where he is almost always treated at some length. And yet, Alan T. Nolan titled his new book (1991) Lee Considered, instead of "Lee Reconsidered" because, in his opinion, Lee has

somehow avoided the scrutiny that usually befalls major historical characters. In other words, he has never really been considered.[4]

For example, history has judged Lee a military genius and revered humanitarian, and Grant, ...we're not sure. On one hand, Grant was the great strategist Lincoln needed. They did, after all, win the war. On the other hand, his supposed lack of tactical and operational imagination earned him the beloved nick-name "Butcher". Lee owned slaves, supported and defended the South's right to continue and expand the "peculiar" institution,[5] and his casualty rate was 16 per cent compared to Grant's 10. In fact, Lee's casualty rate was the highest of any commander on either side,[6,7] and, he lost the war.

While other leaders on both sides have been subject to intense "monday morning quarterbacking", Lee's actions have been judged correct simply because he felt they were right and just.[8] When historical facts could not be reconciled to this image, this "Myth", the facts seem to have been clouded, or in some cases, purposely distorted with volumes of explanations and mitigating circumstances. The battle of Gettysburg is a typical example of this process.

Focusing on July 1-3 of 1863, let's consider the relatively simple question (in hindsight): was Lee correct in his decision to attack the Army of the Potomic near the little town of Gettysburg?

Southern forces: About 76,000
Northern forces: About 90,000[9]

Jeb Stuart was unaccounted for until the evening of 2 July. Lee did not really know how much of Meade's army he was facing, nor its exact disposition.[10]

Union forces occupied what proved to be some of the best high ground of war.[11]

Longstreet strongly counseled against the attack, and for a move toward Washington to induce the North to attack Lee's forces on prepared ground of their own choosing.[12]

The rifled bullet had greatly increased the advantage afforded the defense. This had been vividly demonstrated in earlier battles.[13]

Lee attacked, repeatedly. By the evening of 3 July, Southern killed, wounded or missing numbered 28,000, one third of Lee's army.[14] What was left of the Army of Northern Virginia retreated southward. Meade's forces did not pursue aggressively enough to trap and annihilate the enemy. Lee's second attempt at an of evasive northern campaign ended in failure and marked the last real offensive action for his army.[15]

Douglas Southal Freeman typifies the traditional approach to examining Lee's decisions.

> " ... but only at Gettysburg had he met with definite defeat, and even there he **clouded the title of his adversary to a clear-cut victory** . . . difficulties of the south would have been even worse had not the Army of Northern Virginia occupied so much of the thought and armed strength of the North. Lee is to be judged, in fact, **not merely by what he accomplished ... but by what he prevented the hosts of the Union from doing sooner elsewhere."**[16] (emphasis added)

Although Lee himself seldom chastised subordinates, or attempted to shirk responsibility for his actions, in this instance he fueled what was to become typical Southern post-war

rationalization with the statement: "If I had Stonewall Jackson with me, so far as man can see, I should have won the battle of Gettysburg."[17]

William Garrett Piston's Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant specifically addresses the highly publicized accusation that James Longstreet was responsible for the loss at Gettysburg because he did not fully support Lee's decision to attack. The burgeoning myth simply could not tolerate the concept of Lee making such a serious mistake as Gettysburg proved to be. Therefore someone else had to be blamed, the facts clouded, the defeat otherwise mitigated, or some combination thereof.

Piston's, and other recent studies, indicate that if any of Lee's lieutenants failed him at Gettysburg; if Lee's faulty plan could have been salvaged by perfect timing and aggressive action, Jubal Early should be the one singled out as having acted sluggishly and without spirit.

Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, Jubal Early became president of the Southern Historical Society, an organization specifically formed to "ensure the acceptance of what its members considered to be a true history of war."[18]

This was one of several "societies" that William Garret Piston was referring to when he said that Southern publicists "set Robert E. Lee on the road to sainthood."[19] By 1880, a member of Early's staff could unabashedly write of Lee: "The Divinity in his bosom shone translucent through the man, and his spirit rose up to the Godlike."[20]

Did Early and others purposely distort historical facts to the point that the halo effect surrounding Lee washed away any possible question of personal shortcomings of their own, as well as his? Or, was the mythical Lee created from a simple need for something good to believe in during a very discouraging period in history? Either way, at the very least, some of the basic facts we thought we knew about Robert E. Lee should be questioned. There is room for doubt.

CHAPTER III

DID THE SOUTH HAVE TO LOOSE?

From the very beginning of the Civil War, the North enjoyed a distinct advantage over the South in almost every major category: people, money, industry, foreign relations, Army, Navy and political system. The South, on the other hand, had the easier task: don't lose. The North had to come south to win, occupy and reunite; the South just had to prolong the war long enough for the North to become discouraged.

What started out as a war between unprepared amateurs, showcased tactical, operational and strategic mistakes on both sides. Both sides suffered from the Napoleonic concept of the decisive battle and "Jomini maximums like strategy is defined as directing masses on decisive points."[21] Due to the many material advantages the North enjoyed, it could endure these mistakes much better than the South.

Any rudimental net assessment should have indicated that the South needed to adopt a conservative strategic defense to capitalize on the North's extremely difficult task of defeating, occupying and reuniting the huge geographical expanse of the southern states. The South also had to preserve their own extremely limited assets. Additionally, if unclear at the very beginning of the war, soon thereafter it should have been inherently obvious that rifled weapons added another plus to the defense that simply could not be ignored.

There were three basic types of defensive strategies the South could have employed at different times and places: Static defense (like Fredericksburg and Richmond); Strategic and operational defense/tactical offense, (emphasizing mobility like Joe Johnson's later operations); and, Strategic defense/operational offense/tactical defense. Lee's Pennsylvania campaign would have been an excellent example of this last category, had Lee taken Longstreet's advise and moved toward Washington, selected suitable high ground and induced Meade to attack him.

Certainly, the South would have had to have made some very hard choices. Obviously they could not have defended everywhere. This is how Lee justified his version of the "offensive-defensive". The general plan however, might have called for holding in Virginia and the West utilizing maneuvering operational defense/ tactical offense; static defenses at both ends of the Mississippi; and operational offenses (emphasizing the tactical defense) through Kentucky up into the Butternut region of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, where the reception may have been less hostile than in the Northeast.

Southern strategy should primarily have centered on (1) remaining intact, both militarily and geographically, thereby; (2) forcing the enemy into attempting to occupy more and more hostile territory and create longer and longer lines of communication, while (3) denying him any substantial military victory to rally political support to continue the war.

Jefferson Davis, not unlike Pericles, may have had a good strategy in mind, but he could not implement it. His "offensive-defensive" was based on Washington's successful (Fabian) campaigns against the British[22] and may have even slightly resembled the plan just outlined above. There is, however, much truth in the sentiment that the South did what the South did, because the South was the South. There was what seems to be an almost insurmountable internal conflict between Hamiltonian means, required to secure Jeffersonian ideals.

The first reason Davis could not dictate an effective strategic defense was that he could not keep his army consolidated. Political influence of the coastal, border and western states was too much for a young, weak central government to overcome. Everyone wanted protection, and they were used to that protection being provided, at least in part, by the central government.

The second factor inhibiting a Washingtonian strategy of attrition was

> ". . . the temperament of the southern people. Believing that they could whip any number of Yankees, many southerners scorned the notion of 'sitting down and waiting' for the Federals to attack." "'The idea of waiting for blows instead of inflicting them, is altogether unsuited to the genius of our people.' declared the Richmond Examiner."[23]

Perhaps the final, decisive hurdle Davis failed to clear was the undue political and strategic dominance Virginia attained just by joining the seceding states. Embedded in this Virginian mystique was the rise to prominence of General Robert E. Lee.

History would be hard-pressed to give us an example of a more politically subservient military leader, but in actuality, Lee represented Davis' greatest challenge to implementing any type of truly defensive strategy.

There is much evidence to support the belief that Lee knew full well the strategy dictated by the situation, but he was firmly committed to the offense. In The American Way of War, Russell Weigley states that it was not uncommon for Lee to profess one thing and do another.

> "My desire has been to avoid a general engagement, being the weaker force, and by maneuvering to relieve the portion of the country referred to."[24]

As Weigley points out, this might have been written by George Washington, but was actually a correspondence from Lee to Davis written the second day of the battle of Second Manassas. In fact, Lee's avowed purpose when he moved north from Richmond in the summer of 1862 was to destroy the enemy army before him.[25]

Lee's interpretation of the "offensive-defensive" was that the South had to attack the North, preferably in the North, to divert Northern armies and/or resources, thus defending the South from attack, and hopefully breaking Northern will to continue the war.

As late as July of 1864, Lee still sought the offensive.

> "If we can defeat or drive the armies of the enemy from the field, we shall have peace. All our efforts and energies should be devoted to that object."[26]

We know the ending to the story. Lee's offensive actions hurt the South more than they hurt the North, but historically, whether Lee was right or wrong has taken a back seat to: "could the South have done anything else?".

As the most influential Southern military leader of the war, had Lee put his full support into some variation of a Fabian strategy, could Davis have orchestrated a truly defensive strategic effort? What if Lee simply had not emerged as the champion of the offense? Had the South conserved its assets, could it have forestalled Northern victory another six months? Another year? Year and a half? Without victories like Vicksburg and Gettysburg for sustenance, could Northern will have even survived until 1865?

Even if the South had won this particular four-year conflict, conditions would have probably remained ripe for a series of follow-on wars. Still yet, in this particular conflict, there has to be a measure of doubt in the statement that the South could not possibly have won.

CHAPTER IV

ANTIETAM AND GETTYSBURG, GLORIOUS DEFEATS

On the morning of 13 December 1862, 72,000 Confederates faced 106,000 Unionists from prepared positions at Fredricksburg, Virginia. Responding to comments from an observer obviously impressed with the size and demeanor of the attacking force, Stonewall Jackson exclaimed: "Major, my men have failed to **take** a position, but to **defend** one, **never**. I am glad the Yankees are coming."[27,28]

Jackson had reason to be optimistic. Only one of eight frontal attacks succeeded during the Civil War. This was not the exception.[29] For Lee, however, this defensive posture at Fredericksburg was merely a winter respite between his two major summer offensives into the North.

With the help of a series of Northern actions ranging from ineptitude to charges of cowardice or treason (Pope, on McClellan's failure to support), Lee's "offensive-defensive" was at least partially exonerated by the victory at Second Manassas. Pressure on Richmond had been relieved. Two days after the final skirmish of Second Manassas, on 3 September 1862, Lee wrote Davis:

> "The present seems to be the most propitious time since the commencement of the war for the Confederate Army to enter Maryland, [but the army] is not properly equipped for an invasion... is feeble in transportation ... the men... in thousands of instances are destitute of shoes ..."[30]

On 4 September, obviously without a reply from Davis, Lee ordered his army to advance to the North. Perhaps a victim of his own success at Second Manassas, Lee appeared certain that the invasion of Maryland would break the will of "those people" (Northerners), whom he considered below contempt. He also felt he could defeat the "demoralized" Northern army, if required. For Lee this was a war-ending strategy.

After Second Manassas, Lee really only had two basic choices, forward or back. He couldn't stay where he was because he was sustaining his army from the land, and remaining two or three days in one area seems to have been the limit. Given Lee's tendency toward the offense, it's not difficult to comprehend his choice. Furthermore, his decision to move into Maryland would have been a good example of the strategic defense/operational offense/tactical defense discussed in Chapter III, had he avoided direct confrontation with the Army of the Potomac. Lee, however, favored Napoleon over Fabius.

Deciding that he needed to eliminate the Union garrison at Harper's Ferry to maintain a minimal ammunition supply line, Lee divided his army in the presence of larger forces. A copy of Lee's orders and disposition of forces fell into McClellan's hands on 13 September. Lee was informed of this the next day, but Jackson's easy capture of Harper's Ferry on the 15th further reinforced Lee's belief that the Northern forces were down and out. To return to Virginia without fighting would mean loss of face, so Lee decided

to offer battle. He ordered his army to converge on Sharpsburg, a little Maryland town bordered on the east by Antietam Creek.[31]

The South lost 13,724 men killed, wounded or missing at the battle of Antietam.[32] Had McClellan not delayed his initial attack, allowing Hill's forces to arrive from Harpers Ferry just in time to save Lee's right flank from complete disintegration, the damage would have even been more severe. Had McClellan offered anything but a feeble pursuit, he probably could have trapped and destroyed what was left of the Army of Northern Virginia before it escaped into the Valley.

The Antietam campaign did not accomplish any of the South's or Lee's objectives except taking the war out of Northern Virginia for awhile. It cost the South nearly a third of Lee's army and any hope of foreign recognition, and it gave the North a huge moral victory. It did not, however, change Lee's commitment to the offense. Less than a year later, after a successful defensive engagement at Fredericksburg, he would override opposing plans and convince Davis that the Army of Northern Virginia's (and the South's) best course of action was to invade Pennsylvania.

Lee's perspective in 1863 was the same as it had been the previous year. He thought an invasion into Pennsylvania would divert the war from Virginia, strike fear into the hearts of "those people", possibly be the last ditch effort for foreign recognition, and force Lincoln to abdicate to Northern factions seeking an end to the war.

On 3 June, Longstreet's and Ewell's corps started west to the Shenandoah Valley. Hill's corps and a portion of Stuart's calvary remained behind as a deception to hold Hooker's Northern forces in place. The deception worked until 11 June. Hooker then withdrew to Centerville, north of the Potomac. Hill joined the rest of Lee's army and proceeded north under cover of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

On 25 June, Lee crossed the Potomac and headed up the Cumberland Valley. Meade, having replaced Hooker on 28 June, immediately set his army (seven corps) in pursuit of Lee.

On 1 July 1863, the two armies met in what was arguably the most significant battle, of the most significant event, in American History. As described earlier, Southern losses were severe, (as were Northern losses) and would have, once again, been much worse had the Northern commander properly followed up his victory. Again, with the exception of transferring the war from Northern Virginia, none of Lee's objectives were accomplished. In fact, the situation in the West was still deteriorating; Vicksburg had fallen; and, the Army of Northern Virginia was to never again be a credible offensive threat to Northern territory.

CHAPTER V

LESSONS LEARNED

With a little imagination, one could probably reinforce or contradict every military lesson ever proposed by quoting something from the volumes of historical information surrounding Robert E. Lee. I would like to suggest and discuss three: pay attention to the military basics; never loose your perspective; and never stop questioning.

There are some very rudimentary military lessons that should be learned from Lee's campaigns and battles concerning logistics, administration and command and control. When Napoleon said that an Army marches on its stomach, it's doubtful that he meant that they no longer needed shoes. The Army of Northern Virginia fared very poorly in both categories. This seriously effected the fighting strength of Lee's army due to straggling or "remaining aloof" as Lee noted to Davis in several letters. Quotes addressing the ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-armed southern soldier are numerous in almost every book about the Civil War. This is part and parcel to the argument that the South was destined to loose.

There are counter arguments that suggest there were shoes and food available, but just did not get to the army, particularly the Army of Northern Virginia. In a letter to Davis, shortly after Chanchelorsville, Lee writes:

> "I have been mortified to find that when any scarcity existed, this was the only army in which it is found necessary to reduce the rations."[33]

There are many other examples of Lee's letters concerning logistics, but they are all tinged with the same demurring tone. He was not a quartermaster. As was the case at Gettysburg, Lee's "defective" supply arrangements are often singled out as a limiting factor in his decisions. Whether it was his personal "submissiveness" or the fact that, like for so many other commanders, it just wasn't glorious enough to occupy much of his time, the lesson remains the same. An operational commander must not only be a **concerned** logistician, he must be an **effective** one.

Administration fits in the same general category. After the Battle of Seven Days', Lee reorganized his army into corps, although there was no rank structure between himself and his division commanders to support the move. One could argue that this was an innovative measure at the time, and went a long way to solving the control problems experienced in the previous battle.

On the other hand, administration was no more glorious than logistics, and probably occupied less of Lee's energies. J.F.C. Fuller points out that no accurate figures exist for Lee's losses which is probably indicative of the indifferent staff work in his army.[34] Lee did not like to spend time reviewing communications and he labored when he wrote them.

Command and control is always a thorn in the side of commanders, but Lee compounded his problems. His orders were consistently vague. His writing style was probably more appropriate for Southern aristocratic society circles, than the

battlefield. The fact that he was a product of his own time and society, did not help his army to understand his orders any better.

Verbal orders were more common and often less precise. His "inexhaustible tact" is often quoted as his only shortcoming. In the West Virginia campaign, he could not, or would not order one of his division commanders to report to another in fear of hurting one or the other's feelings. Even Davis said: "His habit of avoiding any seeming harshness . . . was probably a defect."[35]

Lee's religious convictions also seem to have bordered on fatalism. While he was a past master at maneuvering for battle, when the actual battle came, he often placed the outcome in the hands of a higher authority. J.F.C. Fuller opines that the outcome of the battle of Gettysburg on the second day was indecisive not only due to the weakness of Lee's forces but his lack of control. An English observer writes:

> "What I remarked especially was, that during the whole time the firing continued [Gettysburg, 2nd day], he only sent one message, and only received one report."[36]

An operational commander must pay attention to the "little" details of command demanded of him by those he leads. He must also shoulder the broader responsibilities heaped upon him by those he follows. He is the focal point from large to small; strategy to tactics.

Given the fact that very early in the war, Lee emerged as the preeminent military leader in the South, did he utilize his expertise, influence and authority to best advance Southern

interests? Lee was Davis' senior military advisor for most of the war, but even from a theater commander perspective, one could argue that Lee persued strategies and objectives that were not in keeping with Southern policy. Lee seemed to have had a tendency to be extremely myopic in three areas: estimation of the enemy; regional focus; and, offensive focus.

His contempt for "those people" has been mentioned previously. Both of Lee's invasions into the North were based on faulty assumptions that the Army of the Potomac was demoralized and that the will of the Northern people could be easily broken. More importantly, he never **reassessed** these assumptions. He did not learn from his own mistakes.

Lee's focus on his own theater of operation is often excused for one of two reasons. First, it's arguable that the Eastern Theater was the most important. That's where the Capitals were; that's where the biggest armies were; that's where most of the people were; and, that's where the press was. Second, it was **his** theater, and a commander by necessity, must focus his efforts on his responsibilities.

Looking at his two excursions into the North, one could possibly make a case for the above rationalization in so far as the first (Antietam) is concerned. In 1863, however, there were just too many other things going on to justify Lee running off and playing by himself.

In the spring of 1863, Rosencrans commanded an 84,000 man Union army threatening the vital rail hub at Chattanooga,

Tennessee. Grant had 100,000 men split between Memphis and Vicksburg, threatening to complete his capture of the Mississippi, cutting the South in two. Banks already occupied New Orleans. Although Lee had defeated him at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, Hooker still had 90,000 men in threatening distance of Richmond. Rosencrans opposed Bragg with 45,000 men; Grant by Pemberton with 30,000 and J.E. Johnson with 20,000. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was about 76,000 strong.

Longstreet and War Minister Seddon were both strong proponents of holding in Virginia and reinforcing Vicksburg, as was most of the cabinet. Beauregard proposed a campaign into Tennessee and Kentucky to relieve the Mississippi Valley and Vicksburg. Davis also felt Vicksburg had to be reinforced, but Lee's prestige carried the day.

Lee argued that Grant could not assail Vicksburg in the summer due to the heat, and that it would take Longstreet's two divisions too long to get there anyway. Lee's proposal amounted to a repeat of the Antietam Campaign, but it was **Lee's** proposal. In this case his myopic regional focus was doubly damaging: Vicksburg fell, and his army was severely damaged at Gettysburg.

Hand and glove with Lee's regional focus, was his offensive focus. The policy of the South was defensive. They needed to conserve resources and prolong the war. Lee's commitment to the offense and the concept of the decisive Napoleonic Battle squandered precious Southern resources. He either did not understand, or ignored the importance of the rifled bullet. He

repeatedly overestimated his own capabilities and underestimated his enemy's.

Splitting his numerically inferior forces in the face of superior Union forces, which he did repeatedly, is often referred to as "audacity". Attacking with his weaker forces is often referred as "offensive spirit". By any name, the South could not afford this kind of reckless offensive myopia. It did not help the South in the long run. In this regard, Lee did not fulfill his responsibilities as an operational commander. He was going for the glory, not the gold. Historically, this has been justified by the simple statement that he firmly believed he was doing what was right. That may exonerate the man, but not the commander. The other argument, that Davis and the political system of the South were at fault for not "reigning in" Lee is valid. It does not, however, lessen the impact of Lee's mistakes.

I would suggest one final lesson learned: watch out for heroes. Lee's "halo effect" led the South into offensive strategies they could not sustain. Virtually all the major Southern decision makers felt that defending Vicksburg was the primary concern in early 1863 and direct reinforcements were needed from the East. Still, Lee sold the same offensive plan that had met with disaster the previous year. Lee overshadowed all other Southern leaders, political and military. He dwarfed Beauregard and Joe Johnson on a few early tactical victories and strength of character alone. Of all the mistakes the South committed, this may have been the one from which she was least capable of recovering.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The halo effect surrounding Robert E. Lee has masked some of the real lessons to be learned from his battles and campaigns, and has possibly reinforced erroneous ones. Although this paper does not represent a conclusive study of Lee, and every point briefly discussed here is argued elsewhere in books and volumes of books, I suggest there are three broad lessons that may be of use to the operational commander:

1. Pay close attention to the "less glorious" aspects of warfighting.

2. Never lose the perspective of where you fit in the "big picture."

3. Beware of heroes. Try to remain objective, always, but particularly with historical role models.

On the spectrum of conventional combat from the great Napoleonic Battle/Mahonian High Seas Engagement to the lowest level security assistance, the American military culture has developed in favor of the former, the glorious fight. For the most part that's the type of individual we attract into the military. Most of our young men and women did not enlist to be shop keepers and dishwashers. It's certainly the type we like to promote to ranks commensurate with operational command. It is our warrior ethos. To some (although be it perhaps small) degree the mythical Lee is part of, and has reinforced that culture.

It might be argued that this should never have been our **exclusive** focus, but now, with the disintegration of the USSR, reality seems to be forcing us to broaden our perspective on use of military assets whether we <u>want</u> to, or not. We may have to "unlearn" a lot of history.

Big battles, glorious wars and stark shining heros make much better reading than the monotonous, every-day, mundane military operations and soldiers associated with the very low end of the spectrum. Better reading, however, does not necessarily make better lessons.

It is said that we must learn from history, or be condemned to repeat it. The obvious caveat is that we must learn **correctly** from history. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know when we have learned correctly from history, and when we haven't. That is why it is so important to never stop doubting. Perhaps that is the most important lesson we can learn from this, or any other study of history.

NOTES

1. Nolan, Alan T. Lee Considered. General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, p.59.

2. Fuller, J.F.C. Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957, p.108.

3. Nolan, pp 5, 59-60.

4. Nolan, p.8.

5. Nolan, pp 14, 23-24.

6. Fuller, pp 273-274.

7. McPherson, James, M. Battle Cry of Freedom. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.472.

8. Nolan, pp 6-7.

9. Bellene, Major Stephen. "The Gettysburg Campaign: Its Application Today." Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 23 February 1990, pp 3-6.

10. McPherson, p.649.

11. Nolan, p.96.

12. Klaus, Robert F. "James Longstreet: Operational Vision?" Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 20 May 1991, pp 9-10.

13. Fuller, p.43.

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16. Nolan, p.60.

17. Weigley, p.116.

18. Foster, Gains M. Ghosts of the Confederacy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.50.

19. Piston, William Garrett. Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant. James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987, p.129.

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20. Nolan, p.5.

21. Weigley, p.95.

22. Weigley, p.96.

23. McPherson, p.337.

24. Weigley, p.108.

25. Ibid.

26. Nolan, p.74.

27. Bowman, John S. (Editor) The Civil War, Day by Day. Greenwich: Dorset Press, 1989, p.90.

28. Fuller, p.172.

29. Fuller, p.272.

30. Fuller, p.166.

31. McPherson, p.538.

32. Fuller, p.286.

33. Fuller, p.124.

34. Fuller, p.274.

35. Fuller, p.120.

36. Fuller, p.198.

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